Who Will Feed the Mice?

by Ajahn Amaro

To the memory of
Pat Horner
1920–2003

Who Will Feed the Mice?

To the memory of

Pat Blanco

1928-2003

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Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery

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Front cover: Figurine sculpted by Pat Horner in 1939, when she was in her late teens; photo by Ajahn Amaro. *Inside front cover:* Pat Horner with Stardust, 1966; photographer unknown. *Inside back cover:* Pat Horner with Ajahn Amaro in the garden of her cottage in Kent, mid-1990's; the shed to which the mice were banished is in the far right-hand corner; photo by Jane Hill. *Back cover:* Pat Horner with Ajahn Amaro at Ocean Beach, San Francisco, March 1998; photo by Tony Hill.

This small book is lovingly dedicated to the memory of my mother, Pat Horner. May the afterglow of goodness that she left in the world continue to shine for many generations.

"The early teachers" is a term for mother and father. "The early deities" is a term for mother and father. "Those worthy of worship" is a term for mother and father. And why? Parents are of great help to their children, they bring them up, feed them and show them the world.

—Anguttara Nikaya *4.63*

The following is based on a talk given on March 29, 2003, at Abhayagiri Monastery, Redwood Valley, California.

This is probably the last Saturday night talk that I'll be giving for quite a while. As the resident community is aware, but visitors probably are not, I received news from my sister in England that our mother is extremely ill, and the signs are that she won't live for more than a few months. So I plan to be flying to England in a week.

The Buddha once said that if you were to carry your parents around with you for their whole lives—your father on one shoulder and your mother on the other—even to the point where they are losing their faculties and their excrement is running down your back, this would not repay your debt of gratitude to them. But you could repay the debt if your parents were not virtuous and you established them in virtue; if they weren't wise and you established them in wisdom; if they were stingy and you established them in generosity; if they had no faith in the spiritual path and you led them to it. (*Anguttara Nikaya* 2.32)

One day many years ago, I spoke of this teaching very matter-of-factly with my mother, assuming that she would be as

impressed as I was with how highly the Buddha praised the role that parents play in one's life. And, as she almost invariably did anytime I tried to spout some spiritual statement, she responded, "What utter balls!" She was very good at keeping me level, as I can get somewhat airy-fairy at times. Her point, though, was that it isn't a one-way process. She said, "Why do you talk about it in terms of being in debt? What could be more wonderful and satisfying than bringing children into the world and watching them grow? It isn't like a job that you need to be paid for." I was really impressed by that.

For obvious reasons, I've been reflecting a lot recently on my mother's influence on my life, and the thought arose that, until I met the Dhamma when I was twenty-

one, she was the main—if not the only—source of my being able to see that which was noble, worthy, and good in the world. I didn't grow up in a religious household—England is a very nonreligious country—but both my parents were very good people, especially my mother. She really embodies unselfishness, kindness, and generosity—and a tremendous harmlessness toward all living beings; she is physically unable to hurt any creature. When I wonder where I got the inspiring influences or the inclinations toward that which is good and wholesome and useful, I realize that they came almost entirely from her.

After my mother's father died, she told me that she'd received much of her guidance and direction from him. She deeply respected her inheritance of his gentleness,

self-effacement, and benevolence toward all things, and she passed on those qualities. That was really my main spiritual influence before I went to Thailand: anything that kept me operating somewhere in the neighborhood of balanced human behavior was thanks to her. So I've developed a great feeling of gladness and gratitude toward her that I was fortunate enough to receive this.

Another realization that has become clearer as I've been meeting people and teaching over the years is that those who've come from broken homes, or who have had very unstable family situations, assume that life is unsteady and unpredictable; they often have a deep sense of insecurity. I remember being struck during my first few years of meeting and liv-

ing with such people, and there are a great many in this world, that I never would have conceived of the experiences they'd had, let alone had them myself. Even though my parents had plenty of faults and our lives were not easy, an astonishing stability and reliability had been present, particularly on my mother's part. (My father was often kept busy, first with the farm and then travelling with his work, and besides, I think it was Robert Bly who defined the Industrial Age father as "that which sits in the living room and rustles the newspaper.")

I've begun to reflect on the sense of security that arises from this intuition that life has a reliable basis. In stable families, parents impart this. If one doesn't have it, then one has to find it later on in other

ways. For a child, the parents are a kind of substitute for the Dhamma, that basis upon which everything rests and around which everything revolves.

I didn't always get on with my parents. But they never argued in front of us and they were always there, establishing a continuity of presence and support. And thinking about that, I've seen that they reflected the qualities of Dhamma that are so crucial: *Dhammaniyamata*—the orderliness or regularity or patterned-ness of the Dhamma; and *Dhammatthitata*—the stability of the Dhamma.

In a way, that's the job or role that parents have, the archetype they embody: being stable, the rock that things rest upon—and exhibiting that quality of regularity, orderliness, or predictability as the prin-

ciple that can be relied on and that we can be guided by.

Incidentally, I was the only son and the youngest child, so I can also see the downside of having an ever-present, totally loving mother: you might actually believe that you are the center of the universe! I suspect I can also attribute, can also "blame," a certain amount of my narcissistic tendencies, an over-inflated view of myself, on my always-caring mother.

My parents tried very hard to look after us, but we lived on a small farm and had gone bankrupt when I was about six. After we sold the farm my father eked out a living as a small-time reporter for a dog magazine, and even though my sisters and I were sent to private schools, we were only able to attend them thanks to scholarships

and my mother's parents shelling out whatever fees had to be paid.

When I was about twelve, some of my mother's extraordinary qualities became apparent to me in a very powerful way. I was a growing lad who had a cooked breakfast every morning before going off to school and would come back in the late afternoon and then eat cream doughnuts for tea and an hour later scarf down huge amounts of food at supper. I was turning into a burly youth. And every afternoon my mother waited in her car at the bus stop at the end of the lane, a mile away from our home. One day I got off the bus and she wasn't there. I thought, "That's strange." And I walked—I thought maybe she was a bit late—and walked and walked but she didn't appear. I got all the way back

to the house and she wasn't there either. When my sisters returned from school, we found out that our mother had collapsed and been hospitalized; she was found to be suffering from malnutrition.

For months she'd been living only on tea and toast. None of us had noticed—because we'd all been so busy gobbling our meals—that she'd been trying to make the food go a bit further by not eating. She'd never made a fuss, never said anything. And the next we knew she was in the hospital. It hit me like a ton of bricks that she would actually starve herself while feeding all of us and not complain. And when we went to visit her in the hospital she apologized as if she were wasting our time! After all, we could have been doing our homework or out somewhere enjoying ourselves.

I think that was the first time I became aware of the kind of qualities she had and tried to be more alert to the possibilities of following her extremely powerful and noble example.

Just the other day I was reminded of another significant story about her. One Christmas she had been given a beautiful new vacuum cleaner by one of my sisters. She was very proud of it, as she had not had a new vacuum since her wedding in the early '50s.

By this time (in the '80s) the family was not in such dire economic straits, so my mother went on holiday in January, as she often did, because she liked to get a bit of sunshine; she would become very depressed in the damp, gray, endless English winters and would go off on a cheap pack-

age tour and stay for a week on a Mediterranean island. Soon after she came back from this holiday she was doing a bit of housekeeping—the place was a little dusty and needed a going over—so she wheeled out the vacuum cleaner, picked up the hose, and a cascade of hazelnuts came pouring out. "What!?!" she thought. "Hazelnuts? Where on earth did these come from?" And then she remembered—because she was a great provider for the local fauna—the large bird feeder in which she put nuts, grains, and seeds for the different birds and other creatures. She looked at the feeder and saw that it was empty. The whole half-a-year's worth of hazelnuts that she'd put in it was completely gone. But there they were all over her living room floor. Furthermore, a neat

little hole had been chewed in the hose of her brand new vacuum cleaner. She realized that the mice had found the bird feeder, removed the nuts from it, and transported them into the apparent safety of the long dark tunnel of the hose, filling the entire length of it. And now her new vacuum cleaner wouldn't work properly because of the hole in its tube.

I arrived for a visit just after this trauma had occurred and was given two jobs, one of which was repairing the hose; the other was evicting the mice. My mother had had just a bit too much. "I've got so few nice things," she said, "and now my beautiful new vacuum cleaner is ruined. Those mice have got to go!"

As my mother's eyes are not very good, I began hunting the mice. She figured they

had to be in the laundry room, where she kept a pile of old clothes and blankets and towels and such, because, along with looking after animals, she also had a garden that she was very fond of and, whenever a frost was due, she would go out in the evenings to cover all the bushes with blankets and towels—and occasionally with expensive dresses that my sister had bought her in London (and which my sister, to her great chagrin, sometimes spotted draped over the azaleas). My mother was pretty sure the mice were nesting under this stack of cloth.

As it happened she was quite right and, about 16 layers down, I indeed found a little cluster of blinking and startled field mice. We scooped them up and she said, "Take them out to the garden shed."

There she had made a nice little rodent bed—naturally she couldn't bear just to dump them on the concrete. So now she was feeling relieved and her spleen was fully vented.

That night, however, she couldn't sleep because of thinking about those poor little mice who were now so cold out in the shed. She had a very restless night and, early the next day, she began taking food out to them. My mother then would set out small dishes of hazelnuts and oatmeal every day so that the little creatures would make it through till early spring, when they could gather food for themselves. She has a very compassionate nature, even if she occasionally goes a bit overboard.

The one creature that my mother doesn't like very much is the cat—largely

because of how cats hunt and kill birds and other small creatures. The way cats tease their prey really breaks her heart. On one occasion, however, when all us children had grown up and gone away, and my father was traveling a lot and she was by herself, a very ragged tomcat came around and started following her. It looked so forlorn, so messed up, that she started feeding it. And the news spread pretty fast: "There's a soft touch down at Farthing Green Farm." Within eighteen months she had twenty-three cats. Some were visitors. But once this tom got a bit of bulk back on and was in full breeding form, he produced offspring with any of the female cats that came around. So here was this big tom—my mother named him Father Flynn, although I'm not quite sure where

the name came from—and his partners and a vast array of offspring.

Finally my mother realized she had to do something or the cats would go on reproducing ad infinitum. So she gathered them all up and took them to the animal refuge, where she knew they would be found good homes. On a farm if a cat has kittens, the farmer usually just puts them in a bag and takes them to the pond and drowns them. There was absolutely no way my mother could do that.

So having a vast compassionate nature is a very beautiful thing, but it can cause a certain amount of distress, as most of us have experienced ourselves.

And now my mother is 82 years old and her body seems to be reaching its limit. How does one hold that? How does one use the practice to relate to the situation—to bring balance to the heart and to be of benefit to her and to others?

The wonderful Thai forest master Luang Por Duhn teaches us that the *citta,* the heart, *is* the Buddha. "Don't look for the Buddha anywhere else," he says, "the aware quality of the heart is the Buddha." This is an extraordinarily forthright, clear, completely nondualistic teaching.

The problem that arises when we love or hate someone is that there is a polarity, a duality, that the heart easily can be drawn into: there's me here and there's the other out there. And the more intense the emotion, the greater the feeling of duality.

Although we can be very focused on generating loving-kindness toward another being, there's always the matter of also sustaining the liberating insight that recognizes selflessness, *anatta,* that sees that all *dhammas* are not-self and that the impression of a self-existent, separate entity is merely an impression based upon ignorance and the activity of the senses. This conundrum can be a focus of practice.

In this light it's interesting to reflect on the great masters and the relationships between their spiritual practices and their families. Ajahn Chah was recognized as a highly accomplished being, and one of his first disciples when he started at Wat Pah Pong was his mother. She moved out of her village, was ordained as a nun, and

went to live in the forest with him and his cluster of monks. When she died, Ajahn Chah made a great ceremony of her funeral—it was a huge affair—and he ordained eighty or ninety people during the event to make merit for her. Moreover, the main temple, the ordination hall, at Wat Pah Pong was built on the exact spot where his mother was cremated.

Sri Ramana Maharshi was also said to be a supremely detached being; he was famed for being so equanimous that rats sometimes nibbled on his legs when he sat in *samadhi* and he allowed doctors to treat him because it made *them* feel better. Similarly to the life of Ajahn Chah, his mother became his disciple and went to live at the bottom of Arunachala Mountain while he was in a cave at the top. After she died, he

too built his ashram on the place where she was cremated.

So here are these two highly accomplished, extraordinarily detached beings who both built their temples on their mothers' ashes. Of course this may have no significance whatsoever, but to me it indicates that they're *not* saying that "All *sankharas* are impermanent, my mother is just a formation in nature like any other, and it's no big deal." There's a mysterious twining here of both the realization of ultimate truth and the recognition of the unique quality of that personal connection on the material plane. It's almost as if the mother is the primordial symbol of the source of reality, as she is the source of life on the physical plane. After all, in the West we freely use the term "Mother Nature,"

and "nature" is another word for "Dhamma." So perhaps it is natural and perfectly appropriate to accord this being with whom we have a unique relationship a unique position among all the dimensions of life that we experience.

At this time, I have found myself practicing, first of all, to establish in the mind as clear an insight of the nondual as possible—or you might say to establish the heart in pure knowing—and then I've been bringing up a phrase or question, an investigational statement, such as, "Where is my mother?" or "What is my mother?" The purpose of this process is to let go of any habitual identification, to break down that notion of myself here and the other over there, and to open the heart to the present moment.

Then, within that basic space of awareness, I consciously bring forth the intentions and emotions of *metta, karuna, mudita,* and *upekkha*—loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

There needs, however, to be a balancing within that, because as soon as those intentions or qualities are aroused, one can slip back into the idea of me over here sending it to you over there, which is a dualism. But there's a way that Dhamma practice can guide us toward both seeing things as completely empty (the ultimate truth of things) and respecting the convention that there's a being here and a being there (the relative truth of things). On one level that convention pertains. But it's only a partial truth, a half-truth, and it exists within the context of Dhamma.

One of the ways that the Buddha spoke about stream entry—the irreversible breakthrough to realization of the Dhamma—was as a "change of lineage." The phrase relates to the idea that "I am a personality; this is me, this is mine, this is what I am." This belief is called *sakkayaditthi,* or "personality view." And as long as "I am the body," then of course Pat Horner and Tom Horner are my parents. But if the body is not-self, and perceptions are not-self, feelings are not-self, the personality is not-self, what does that say about Mr. and Mrs. Horner? What does that mean? If this body is not-self, then the lineage of the body can't be the whole story.

This is a subtle point of Dhamma and it's easy to grasp it in the wrong way, as I most painfully did when I was a young

novice in Thailand. I can't believe I really did this, but I recall that, in a letter I sent to my mother from Thailand in '78, I actually wrote, "You know, in truth, you're not really my mother." Something in me doesn't want to remember having done that, but I have a sinking feeling that I did.

Anyway, we exchanged a number of rather tense letters in those days, when I was "full of the light" in Thailand, but this one certainly represented the nadir. In retrospect it was pretty awful and very embarrassing. When my mother received this particular inspired declaration, she pointed out that she definitely was my mother since certainly nobody else was. She wrote, "I care about you because you are my son, not because you are a Buddhist monk—*compris?*"

Even at that time I realized that this was a totally appropriate response from her. I wasn't taking hold of the principle correctly. However, when that insight is present and we don't pick it up wrongly, we can genuinely see this change of lineage, without getting the relative and the ultimate planes confused.

There *is* that relationship with our parents in this flow of karmic formations, but the lineage of our true reality is seen to be fundamentally rooted in the Dhamma. That's the source, the origin, the basis. Rather than thinking of one's physical parents as the origin, we can have the clear realization that that's just part of the situation. It's the Uncreated, the Unformed, the Unborn, the Unconditioned

that's the genuine source, the genuine origin, the basis, the ground of reality.

We can fully respect the convention *and* we can base our practice on the insight that all sankharas arise and cease, that all dhammas are not-self. There's nothing to get heated about, nothing to get carried away by; it's just life doing its dance. The heart can remain serene, stable, clear, and bright. Which, of course, is what makes it possible for us to be of benefit to others, whether they be our parents, our children, our teachers, our students, . . . or the mice.

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Pat Horner passed away peacefully on July 16, 2003. She had pancreatic cancer but was largely able to remain active and independent until she died. During her last swim at her local pool, at the end of June, she was chagrined that she could manage only twenty lengths in half an hour (rather than her usual twenty-four), and ten days before the end she was out in her underwear and a raincoat at midnight, rescuing a favourite plant from a snail attack brought on by a sudden rain shower. She was also still solving tricky crossword clues up to the time that she slipped into unconsciousness, three days before she died.

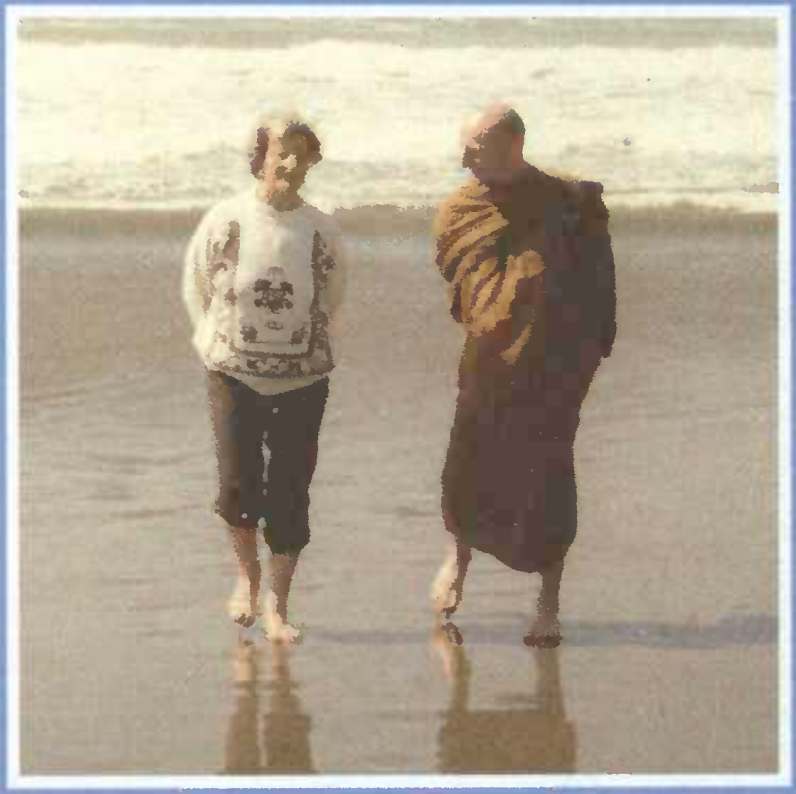
She passed away at home in her own bed, with myself and her two daughters, Kate and Jane, as well as her son-in-law, Tony, whom she loved as a second son, at her side.

She is buried close to a favorite ancient copper beech in Sherborne, Dorset, with a small but bright flower garden on her grave.

if there are any heavens, my mother
will (all by herself) have
one. It will not be a pansy heaven nor a
fragile heaven of lilies-of-the-valley but
it will be a heaven of blackred roses
—e. e. cummings

About the Author

Ajahn Amaro was born J. C. J. Horner in Tenterden, Kent, England, in 1956, the youngest of three children. At the time his parents owned a small farm with several horses and dogs, growing apples and a few crops, and raising pigs and chickens. He began his monastic training in the forest monasteries of northeast Thailand with Ajahn Chah in 1978. He continued his training under Ajahn Sumedho, first at Chithurst Monastery in West Sussex, England, and later at Amaravati Buddhist Centre outside of London, where he lived for ten years. In June of 1996, Ajahn Amaro moved to California to establish Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, where he currently serves as co-abbot.



A reflection on a mother's love and inspiration.

Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery